REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE *(DD-MM-YYYY)*	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED *(From - To)*
06-05-2011	Master of Military Studies Research Paper	December 2010 - May 2011

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE
An Uncertain Relationship: Special Operations and Clausewitz's On War

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
N/A

5b. GRANT NUMBER
N/A

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
N/A

6. AUTHOR(S)
Major Mason Dula, USAF

5d. PROJECT NUMBER
N/A

5e. TASK NUMBER
N/A

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
N/A

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
USMC Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Quantico, VA 22134-5068

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
N/A

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
N/A

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
N/A

11. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER
N/A

12. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES
N/A

14. ABSTRACT

An understanding of the uncertainty of war and warfare is critical to reaching an understanding of special operations. This uncertainty exerts effects on the specific military requirements of both special and conventional operations, and reveals the differences that must define both. Defining special operations simply as activities that lack a broad conventional requirement, without highlighting the role of uncertainty, obscures the true nature of special operations and hinders the organization and training of forces that conduct them. Clausewitz's concept of "trinitarian" war provides an analytical framework to understand special operations. Trinitarian war explains how change and uncertainty affect the emerging requirements of war, and how military commanders address those requirements. Exploring the relationship between special operations and those requirements filled by conventional forces offers a deeper understanding of both.

15. SUBJECT TERMS
Clausewitz, Special Operations

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE	UU	29	Marine Corps University / Command and Staff College
Unclass	Unclass	Unclass			19b. TELEPONE NUMBER *(Include area code)* (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING SF 298

1. REPORT DATE. Full publication date, including day, month, if available. Must cite at lest the year and be Year 2000 compliant, e.g., 30-06-1998; xx-08-1998; xx-xx-1998.

2. REPORT TYPE. State the type of report, such as final, technical, interim, memorandum, master's thesis, progress, quarterly, research, special, group study, etc.

3. DATES COVERED. Indicate the time during which the work was performed and the report was written, e.g., Jun 1997 - Jun 1998; 1-10 Jun 1996; May - Nov 1998; Nov 1998.

4. TITLE. Enter title and subtitle with volume number and part number, if applicable. On classified documents, enter the title classification in parentheses.

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER. Enter all contract numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. F33615-86-C-5169.

5b. GRANT NUMBER. Enter all grant numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. 1F665702D1257.

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER. Enter all program element numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. AFOSR-82-1234.

5d. PROJECT NUMBER. Enter al project numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. 1F665702D1257; ILIR.

5e. TASK NUMBER. Enter all task numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. 05; RF0330201; T4112.

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER. Enter all work unit numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. 001; AFAPL30480105.

6. AUTHOR(S). Enter name(s) of person(s) responsible for writing the report, performing the research, or credited with the content of the report. The form of entry is the last name, first name, middle initial, and additional qualifiers separated by commas, e.g. Smith, Richard, Jr.

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES). Self-explanatory.

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER. Enter all unique alphanumeric report numbers assigned by the performing organization, e.g. BRL-1234; AFWL-TR-85-4017-Vol-21-PT-2.

9. SPONSORING/MONITORS AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES). Enter the name and address of the organization(s) financially responsible for and monitoring the work.

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S). Enter, if available, e.g. BRL, ARDEC, NADC.

11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S). Enter report number as assigned by the sponsoring/ monitoring agency, if available, e.g. BRL-TR-829; -215.

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT. Use agency-mandated availability statements to indicate the public availability or distribution limitations of the report. If additional limitations/restrictions or special markings are indicated, follow agency authorization procedures, e.g. RD/FRD, PROPIN, ITAR, etc. Include copyright information.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES. Enter information not included elsewhere such as: prepared in cooperation with; translation of; report supersedes; old edition number, etc.

14. ABSTRACT. A brief (approximately 200 words) factual summary of the most significant information.

15. SUBJECT TERMS. Key words or phrases identifying major concepts in the report.

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION. Enter security classification in accordance with security classification regulations, e.g. U, C, S, etc. If this form contains classified information, stamp classification level on the top and bottom of this page.

17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT. This block must be completed to assign a distribution limitation to the abstract. Enter UU (Unclassified Unlimited) or SAR (Same as Report). An entry in this block is necessary if the abstract is to be limited.

United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:
An Uncertain Relationship: Special Operations and Clausewitz's *On War*

AUTHOR:
MAJ Mason Dula

AY 10-11

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member Dr. Douglas E. Streusand
Approved:
Date: 4 May 2011

Oral Defense Committee Member Dr. Paul D. Gorski
Approved:
Date: 4 May 2011

Executive Summary

Title: An Uncertain Relationship: Special Operations and Clausewitz's *On War*

Author: Major Mason Dula

Thesis: An understanding of the uncertainty of war and warfare is critical to reaching an understanding of special operations. This uncertainty exerts effects on the specific military requirements of both special and conventional operations, and reveals the differences that must define both. Defining special operations simply as activities that lack a broad conventional requirement, without highlighting the role of uncertainty, obscures the true nature of special operations and hinders the organization and training of forces that conduct them.

Discussion: Clausewitz's concept of "trinitarian" war provides an analytical framework to understand special operations. Trinitarian war explains how change and uncertainty affect the emerging requirements of war, and how military commanders address those requirements. Exploring the relationship between special operations and those requirements filled by conventional forces offers a deeper understanding of both. Linking special operations to war's uncertainty, and defining them in relation to the requirements that shape conventional operations, suggests that forces organized to conduct special operations should have a broad focus and an emphasis on adaptability. Contemporary definitions of special operations are inadequate, in part because they tend to conflate activities with the actors that perform them. These definitions also under-emphasize the role that a military commander's creative spirit and intuition plays in recognizing opportunities for the conduct of special operations, and thus drive Special Operations Forces towards rigidly proscribed missions.

Conclusion: Political and military leaders lack the luxury of allowing uncertainty to dominate preparations for war and must therefore find methods to attempt to manage it. The ability to mount special operations can serve as a nation's hedge against the uncertainty of war, if they are anchored in an understanding of trinitarian war and its implications. Without such an understanding, contemporary models for synchronizing the role of special operations and other military efforts are inadequate.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL ATUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

Preface

This paper emerged out of a desire to explain to military peers what special operations are and what they are not. Initially, my view of Clausewitz and his writing was as a foil to contrast antiquated military theory to the exigencies of modern warfare. As the paper progressed, and my understanding of Clausewitz and *On War* deepened, I realized that the ambiguities surrounding special operations and the forces which conduct them are mirrored in Clausewitz's work—rather than a foil, *On War* became a lens through which to view special operations.

The faculty and staff at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College were of inestimable help in arriving at this paper's conclusions. Specifically, Drs. Douglas Streusand and Paul Gelpi prevented this paper from becoming a literature review about Clausewitz and *On War*, helped fine tune my "tactical writing" with patience and insight, and pushed me to write what I thought, rather than relate what I had learned. LTC Michael Lewis dragged my head out of the murky waters of Clausewitzian theory, and encouraged me to write from the special operations background that informs my thought. Finally, Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper helped me understand Clausewitz and his body of work in a new way, and one fundamental to the conclusions reached in this paper.

Table of Contents

Shakespeare offers only an incomplete truth in noting, "[t]he end of war's uncertain."[1] While contemporary observers of war largely agree that its outcomes are impossible to predict, a growing consensus of authors submit that war is holistically uncertain in its ways and means, as well as its ends. Historians, scientists, and strategic thinkers alike wrestle to define the effects of war's uncertainty, and the mechanisms through which this uncertainty exerts influence on war's planning, conduct, and aftermath. Uncertainty's effect on special operations is the focus of this paper.

Special operations occur as a natural consequence of war's "trinitarian" nature, exist to service specific military needs, and are best defined simply as operations that lack broad conventional force requirements. Trinitarian war, as described in Clausewitz's *On War*, offers a universally valid description of war's nature, and proponents of the concept of "non-trinitarian war" fundamentally misunderstand Clausewitz's exploration of the subject. Extant definitions of special operations ignore the role of uncertainty in determining special operations' aim and scope, and overemphasize the contrast between Special Operations Forces and their conventional counterparts, in isolation from the requirements of war that should define both.

Viewing the relationship between special and conventional operations through the lens of Clausewitz's *On War* offers both a deeper understanding of the differences between conventional and special operations, and of the circumstances of war that create and maintain such differences. The analytical framework of Clausewitz's trinity, which describes the environment of war from which requirements for all military operations emerge, illuminates the proper organization of military forces tasked with the execution

[1] William Shakespeare, "*Coriolanus*," V, iii, 141.

of special operations, and reveals that contemporary models for synchronizing the role of special operations and other military efforts are inadequate.

Examining Clausewitz's *On War*

Clausewitz's *On War* illuminates the uncertainty inherent in war. Recent interpretations of *On War* and insights from non-linear dynamics offer fresh perspectives on the effects of uncertainty. Describing special operations in relation to uncertainty requires a brief exploration of Clausewitz's purpose and methodology in writing *On War.*

Despite the general acknowledgement of *On War* as a classic requiring study in order to understand war, little consensus exists as to Clausewitz's basic purpose. The simplest solution is to accept the purpose offered by the Prussian himself. Antulio Echevarria quotes Clausewitz in describing *On War* as an attempt to "'dispel false and frail concepts' of war and to replace them with verifiable truths, arraigned as a coherent body of knowledge, or theory."[2] Accepting this explanation of *On War's* purpose provides a conceptual framework for establishing a clear, useful, and verifiably true definition of special operations.

In order to expose false theories and determine war's truths, Clausewitz employed the dualism of war's objective and subjective natures, and the influence of both on an understanding of war.[3] Objective truths about war demonstrate validity across time and circumstances, while subjective truths change over time, and according to differing perspectives.[4] War's truths, according to Clausewitz, are comprised of objective

---

[2] Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.

[3] Clausewitz, *On War*, 85, 151.

[4] Colin Grey, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare*, (Pheonix, AZ: Orion Books Ltd, 2005), 31-32. Echevarria also explores the antithetical explanations of objective knowledge offered by modern theorists

principles that should serve as a stable foundation from which to address war's subjective characteristics through the application of insight and intuition.[5] Accepting the existence of universally valid elements of war and assuming that special operations exist within war's objective or universal context, implies that these universal elements also govern or affect special operations.

It is, ironically, Clausewitz's focus on war's verifiable truths that fuels contemporary debates on the relative mutability of war's nature and its character. Clausewitz famously defines war as an act of violence, and others have suggested that the "technique of applying that violence" describes *warfare*.[6] Put another way, Clausewitz discriminates between war and warfare as the proper context in which to search for verifiable truth. Early in *On War*, Clausewitz asserts that "the nature of war is complex and changeable," when exploring the shifting facets of warfare.[7] Clausewitz thus links subjective principles or characteristics to the *conduct* of war. This aspect of warfare is best described as war's character, and is dynamic and constantly changing. Although seemingly contradictory, Clausewitz later claimed that "all wars are things of the *same* nature," when discussing the phenomenon of war itself.[8] To Clausewitz, war, not its conduct, could be defined by objective principles anchored in verifiable truths that would remain constant and immutable. This paper accepts the view, promulgated by many

---

such as Karl Popper, who believed that even objective knowledge is tentative, and a military theory constructed around it would invariably confront new anomalies, which would in turn require new theories to explain. See Echevarria, *Contemporary War*, 23.

[5] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*. Edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 147.

[6] Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 57.

[7] Clausewitz, *On War*, 90.

[8] Ibid., 606.

modern military education systems, that the nature of war is unchanging and objective, while the character of warfare varies and is subjective.

Clausewitz's treatment of uncertainty, as captured in his description of war's "trinitarian" nature, is vital to an understanding his vision of war's verifiable and constant truths. Widely known as Clausewitz's "wondrous trinity," Clausewitz defines the nature of war as:

> more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.[9]

Violence, chance, and reason thus form the essence of war's objective nature. According to Clausewitz, this trinitarian model offers verifiable truth in describing the phenomenon of war, and must also inform or affect warfare, or the methods by which war is conducted.

Contemporary advocates of "non-trinitarian war" fundamentally misunderstand Clausewitz's analytical framework. Martin van Creveld, who coined the term "non-trinitarian," joins others in confusing Clausewitz's "wondrous trinity" of violence, chance, and reason with a three part system involving the populace, military forces, and government of a given belligerent.[10] Proponents for the notion of "non-trinitarian" as an analytical framework to describe certain types of war, those that involve non-state actors as one example, misidentify Clausewitz's trinity and fail to understand its objective

---

[9] Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

[10] Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 47.

nature. This paper asserts that *all wars are trinitarian*, and all wars are fought in environments characterized by the interplay of violence, chance, and reason.

While perhaps helpful in describing the context in which special operations are executed, the elements of trinitarian war offer little to deepen an understanding of the operations themselves without considering the *interactions between the three elements*. A closer examination of the relationships between Clausewitz's wondrous trinity is required to best explain the role of special operations in war and warfare. Examining the elements of violence, chance, and reason from the perspective of non-linear dynamics may explain some of the uncertainty surrounding special operations.

In outlining trinitarian war, Clausewitz uses the metaphor of an object "suspended between three magnets."[11] Clausewitz described the elements of violence, chance, and reason as fixed in their fundamental attributes, but *variable in their relations to one another*. Clausewitz's trinity has the paradoxical effect of anchoring a model of verifiable truths around a metaphorical relationship that contemporary scientists assert is complex, non-linear, and uncertain.[12]

Accepting this interpretation of Clausewitz's metaphor suggests that uncertainty exists in both war's objective elements, as evidenced by the variable relationships between the Clausewitzian trinity, and in its subjective elements, which by definition will

---

[11] Ibid.

[12] Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War", *International Security*, (Winter 1992/93), 63. Unsurprisingly, even Clausewitz's use of metaphor is subject to debate. Other perspectives include that Clausewitz intended the magnet metaphor to illustrate that *theory*, not war itself, must be balanced between the three forces of violence, chance, and reason, and that proponents of a non-linear interpretation of *On War* overstate the unpredictability of Clausewitz's objective elements. See Jon T. Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War*, (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2008), xi.

vary from conflict to conflict.[13] Special operations, like all military actions, therefore *invariably occur in environments marked by uncertainty.* As one of a variety of warfare's means or methods of conduct, special operations are simply aspects of warfare's character, and an understanding of special operations must be informed by the same dynamism and change that characterize warfare. Conversely, special operations must exist within the context of war itself, and therefore must be governed or affected by the verifiable truths sought by Clausewitz in his study of war. While seemingly inane, these realizations have profound implications for reaching a deeper understanding of special operations.

Defining Special Operations

The emergence of special operations as an integral part of modern warfare is inextricably tied to the uncertainty of trinitarian war. This uncertainty permeates efforts by both military and civilian communities simply to codify the term "special operations." Many of these efforts fail to achieve even a basic consensus on the types of military operations warranting inclusion in the category. Other contemporary observers tend to conflate special operations and the forces which conduct them, an error that offers little to distinguish either the defining characteristics of Special Operations Forces, or the discrete aspects of those military operations unique enough to justify the adjective "special." This ambiguity and lack of consensus surrounding basic definitions is striking considering the

[13] Bart Schuurman, "Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars," *Parameters*, (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Spring, 2010), 96-7.

prominence accorded to special operations in both popular imagination, and contemporary military strategy.[14]

Efforts by both military and civilian scholars to agree on the defining characteristics of special operations are inadequate and contradictory. Vice Admiral William McRaven, currently the commanding officer of the Joint Special Operations Command, defined a special operation as "conducted by forces specially trained, equipped, and supported for a specific target whose destruction, elimination or rescue (in the case of hostages), is a political or military imperative."[15] McRaven's definition most closely resembles the U.S. military's *Joint Publication 3-05* definition of "direct-action" missions, which include "short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions...which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover or damage sensitive targets."[16]

McRaven's definition is too narrowly focused around violent offensive action, and includes as a defining characteristic the types of forces conducting the operations themselves. While defining an action by its actor is possible, McCraven's definition indicates that any operation conducted by "specially trained, equipped, and supported" forces becomes a *de facto* special one. This confusion of activity with actor may offer insight into the organization of Special Operations Forces, but provides no compelling

---

[14] Eric T. Olson, "A Balanced Approach to Irregular Warfare," *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, (Washington D.C., Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs Publishing), Spring 2009, vol 16. Contingency Plan (CONPLAN) 7500 is the U.S. Department of Defense campaign strategy against terrorism. U.S. Special Operations Command has been charged with "coordinating and synchronizing" these global operations against terrorism, an unprecedented elevation of special operations' role in contemporary warfare.

[15] William H. McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1996), 8.

[16] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-05: Doctrine for Joint Special Operations*, (Washington D.C., Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2003), GL-6.

justification for the existence of the subset of special operations inside warfare's broader context of military operations.

Alternative definitions build on McCraven's approach, but suffer from similar deficiencies. Dr. Robert Spulak asserts that special operations are "missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction."[17] Overcoming this friction, Spulak asserts, requires the use of special operations forces whose qualities reflect a higher distribution of "high-performing" attributes than found in conventional forces. These attributes include creativity, flexibility, and a loosely defined attribute Spulak groups under the rubric of "elite warriors."[18] This definition again ties special operations to activities performed by a specially selected military force.

The relationship between the relative capabilities of Special Operations Forces and conventional forces is important to understanding special operations themselves, but tends to fuel arguments over the roles and missions of special and conventional forces, rather than illuminate the characteristics of special operations themselves. Significantly, such arguments suggest that special operations exist because they address requirements

---

[17] Robert Spulak, "A Theory of Special Operations: the Origin, Qualities and Use of SOF," *JSOU Report 07-7*, (Hurlburt Field, FL: The JSOU Press, 2007), 1.

[18] Ibid., 14-15. Spulak's definition acknowledges McCraven's approach, and borrows liberally from McRaven's case study. Spulak goes even further to cement a link between special operations forces and special operations, arguing that "[i]t is not the missions that define special operations, but rather the personnel." Spulak acknowledges this argument as "circular" while defending the existence of special operations forces as necessary to achieve strategic objectives whose requirements outstrip the capabilities of conventional forces. Spulak's work offers insight into the characteristics of special operations forces, but fails to establish a compelling explanation for the existence of special operations outside of a relative comparison to the ability of conventional forces. See Spulak, "A Theory," 12-13.

that exceed the capabilities of conventional forces, *whose characteristics may change over time.*[19]

A useful definition of special operations must be divorced from the forces that conduct them. A failure to do so tends to cloud an understanding of special operations by focusing on a discussion of which activities Special Operations Forces should conduct rather than attempting to define the operations themselves. Examining whether counterterrorism or counterinsurgency operations belong under the umbrella of special operations is a potentially useful exercise in pursuing an understanding of special operations. Parsing the nuances of how special operations forces can combat terrorism via a variety of "SOF core activities," such as direct action or special reconnaissance, tends to provoke a debate on whether conventional forces are not equally capable of the same activities.[20] Such debate tends to address military parochialism and friction between military organizations more than it provides insight into the nature of special operations.

Joint military doctrine of the United States offers the best contemporary definition for special operations. According to this doctrine, special operations are:

> **operations** conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to achieve military, diplomatic, informational, and/or economic objectives employing military capabilities **for which there is no broad conventional force requirement**. These operations often require

[19] Ibid., 13.

[20] Michele L. Malvesti, "Time for Action: Redefining SOF Missions and Activities," *CNAS Working Paper*, (Washington D.C.: Center for a New American Security Publishing, 2009), 3-4. Malvesti's work is representative of the broad tendency to conflate special operations with the forces which conduct them. Malvesti's examination of the missions and activities of special operations forces fails to examine whether or not such missions and activities are, in fact, special operations. The clear inference is that since such missions/activities are conducted by special operations forces, they are examples of special operations.

> covert, clandestine, or low-visibility capabilities. [Special Operations] are applicable across the range of military operations.[21]

This definition offers details about the environments in which special operations are conducted, as well as capabilities required for the success of such operations. It avoids, however, defining special operations through the types of force that engage in them. The joint definition's emphasis is on the *relationship between special operations and those operational* ***requirements*** *conventional forces fulfill.*[22]

Requirements, Probabilities, and Uncertainty

As the means through which violence is applied, warfare creates the necessity for military forces tailored to meet the requirements of war. These military forces are developed to operate in the environment of trinitarian war Clausewitz describes in *On War*. The dominant characteristic of trinitarian war is uncertainty, the result of which is an inability to accurately predict the requirements of either war itself, or the types of warfare that characterize any given conflict.

Actions and choices available in this uncertain environment drive war's requirements, which are informed by and must rely on assumptions and probability to predict the number, type, and capabilities of forces required to wage war successfully. The subjective uncertainty of warfare affects forces tailored to meet the requirements of a war after it commences. Conversely, the objective uncertainty of trinitarian war's

---

[21] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-05,* I-1.

[22] Ibid., GL-6. The Joint Publication further defines special operations as "**differ[ing] from conventional operations** in degree of physical and political risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets." This comparison implies the relative characteristics of both special and conventional operations, but fails to address the requirements of war that should shape those characteristics.

interplay of violence, chance, and reason affects forces created in anticipation of some future conflict.

These uncertainties present weighty implications for belligerents in war. Assuming that the impossibility of perfect foresight resulted in the creation of a military force tailored to surgically meet every requirement presented by the *outbreak* of war, would still fail to account for the uncertain interactions of that war's *progress*. Both the context of war and its conduct prove impervious to completely accurate prediction, and therefore both are governed by probability.

Clausewitz addressed the necessity of probabilities and assumptions as gauges for war in his examination of the differences between theoretical war, and the war found in reality.[23] In essence, the probabilities and assumptions political and military leaders use to frame their visions of war are *reified in the military forces created to address war's requirements*. Assuming the character of a given war will be irregular, for instance, will likely result in the creation of a military force whose training, equipment, and doctrine are unfocused on the peculiar requirements of regular warfare.[24]

The efficacy of any military force should then strongly correlate to the degree that the assumptions that inform their creation match the realities of the war that governs their employment.[25] Belligerents who through luck or foresight accurately gauge the

---

[23] Clausewitz, *On War*, 80. Echevarria notes that Clausewitz's refutation of the "laws of logical necessity" as a governing principle in war tends to render arguments for any particular military or political solution to war matters of subjective judgment, not logical or mathematic certainty.

[24] Grey, *Another Bloody* Century, 171. Grey recognizes the link between requirements and capabilities, noting that "[a]rmed forces optimal to engage other armed forces, and then to seize and hold ground, are unlikely to be armed forces optimal for hunting down irregular enemies in dense jungles, mountainous terrain, or mega-cities."

[25] Some scholars in the fields of non-linear dynamics argue that simply knowing the initial condition of any "system" as complex as war is impossible. Explanations for such non-linear uncertainty span a variety

probabilities of war should field a military force capable of meeting many of the requirements a given war demands. Those whose assumptions are less accurate, or who chance favors less, may field a military force ill-suited to meeting many of a given war's requirements. Colin Grey, a noted historian and strategic thinker, argues for the historical prevalence of the latter case when claiming that "[o]ver the centuries identifying a nation's future strategic priorities has proved to be a very imprecise art, and as a result peacetime force structures have seldom proved relevant when put to the test of war."[26]

A simplified presentation of the above argument recognizes that war invariably creates requirements for a belligerent, some of which must be addressed by a military force. These requirements are impossible to perfectly quantify, and actors in war must rely on probabilities and assumptions to mitigate the risks posed by the uncertainty of trinitarian war. Such probabilities and assumptions are never perfectly accurate, and result in the creation of a military force capable of meeting some of war's requirements, but structurally unsuited to fulfilling others. These remaining requirements of war, which standing military forces shaped by war's probabilities are ill-suited to meet, are the realm of special operations.

The Implications of Uncertainty

Special operations are more than simply those military activities that conventional forces do not perform. Special operations can best be viewed as a response to *military requirements* revealed by the uncertainty of trinitarian war. These military requirements

---

of scientific disciplines, touching on holism, complexity theory and adaptive systems, computable mathematics, and the roles of feedback and homeostasis in complex systems. For a broad overview of the role of uncertainty in non-linear systems, see Peter Coveney and Roger Highfield, *Frontiers of Complexity: The Search For Order in a Chaotic World*, (New York, Fawcett Columbine, 1995), 5-42.

[26] Grey, *Another Bloody* Century, 172.

are linked to both conventional force requirements, and *directly linked to the uncertain aspects of both war and warfare.* Attempts to further refine a definition of special operations ignore this uncertainty, and underemphasize the links between trinitarian war, and conventional force requirements.

Conventional force requirements shift over time, in accordance with the prevailing assumptions and calculations of probability favored by political and military leaders. These changes typically happen slowly, in an evolutionary progression.[27] As requirements change, conventional forces adopt or discard capabilities to service those requirements. The interaction of requirements and developed capabilities results in a *constantly changing* array of potential military operations that conventional forces are both prepared, and ill-prepared to perform.

Special operations are directly linked to a similarly variable array of potential requirements by the uncertainty of trinitarian war, and its conduct. Errors in assumption and miscalculated probabilities about the form and conduct of warfare will fail to anticipate all contingencies warfare reveals. Deficiencies in the performance of conventional forces in addressing known requirements might illuminate others that escaped prediction. The military requirements for special operations are thusly linked to changing conventional force requirements, and the fundamentally uncertain aspects of war itself. In both cases, linking discrete roles, missions, or activities together as examples of special operations is an exercise in futility. Over time, the changing

[27] Williamson Murray, "Innovation Past and Present," Murray and Millett, eds., *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period,* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 310-313. Rapid or revolutionary change is possible, and usually occurs in conjunction with a dramatic shift in the assumptions or probabilities used to describe war's possibilities. Murray's treatment of changes in military cultures is complex, and offers differences between peacetime and wartime changes in military bureaucracies. Generalizations from Murray's examination include the assertion that successful shifts in military capability occur slowly, particularly in peacetime.

requirements that drive the need for special operations compel alterations to their forms, functions, appearance and military aims.

Rethinking Special Operations

Accepting the notion that special operations exist as a natural consequence of war's "trinitarian" nature, and that they emerge to address uncertain military requirements offers several advantages over existing models. This definition suggests that the relationship between special operations and conventional operations is poorly understood, potentially hindering the synchronization of both. Linking special operations to the uncertainty of trinitarian war also recognizes the subjective role of a military commander's assessment in identifying opportunities for the conduct of special operations. The proposed definition's first serious implication is that the activities of contemporary Special Operations Forces cannot, or should not, directly correlate with an understanding of special operations.

Divorcing a definition of special operations from the forces that conduct them allows for a flexible understanding of special operations, an understanding which can and should change over time. Emerging requirements derived from war, or preparations for war, which find no standing military forces tailored to meet them can be viewed as special *only as long as the gap between requirements and conventional capabilities persists*. Operating aircraft while using visual augmentation systems, the military jargon for what is known commonly as night-vision goggles, is an illustrative example. The abortive attempt, in 1980, to rescue U.S. hostages held in Iran revealed an emerging military requirement to operate a variety of aircraft with the aid of night-vision

equipment. Existing military forces were unprepared for this emerging requirement.[28] In the context of military capabilities in 1980, piloting an aircraft with night vision goggles was an example of a special operation, even as piloting the same aircraft without night vision equipment remained a conventional force requirement.

Over the next 30 years, however, the use of visual augmentation systems transitioned to become a common, if not yet universal, practice aboard a broad range of military aircraft. The diffusion of technology across the U.S. military and gradual increases in the proficiency of military aviators may explain aspects of this change in military capability. The driving force behind the use of night vision equipment as an aid to flight across the U.S. military aviation community, however, was the identification of that capability as a *broad military requirement.* In this manner, a clearly stated military requirement resulted in a gradual increase in capability across the broader U.S. force, until *the gap between requirement and capability no longer existed.* In 2011, it is no longer useful to consider piloting an aircraft with night vision goggles as a special operation.

A similar example involves the collection of forces engaged in routing the Taliban in Afghanistan in late 2001 and early 2002. The aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States revealed an emerging military requirement for a light ground force, capable of working closely with local actors, to leverage precision targeting and close air support to defeat Taliban forces in Afghanistan. In response to this

---

[28]James H. Kyle, *The Guts To Try: The Untold Story of the Iran Hostage Rescue Mission by the On-Scene Desert Commander*, (New York, NY: Orion Books, 2002), 87-89. The use of visual augmentation systems as aids to flight rested largely inside the Air Force Special Operations (AFSOC) community prior to 1980. Proficiency flying hours using night vision goggles were limited by budget constraints, even inside AFSOC.

requirement, small numbers of U.S. Air Force Combat Controllers, embedded with U.S. Army Special Forces teams and indigenous fighters, leveraged aircraft as varied as B-52s, AC-130s and F-18s in a textbook unconventional warfare campaign against the Taliban.[29] Delivering lethal effects via airpower was a broad, conventional military requirement in 2001, as were target acquisition, terminal guidance operations, and close air support. Light ground forces existed in abundance prior to the offensive in Afghanistan, as did aircraft capable of performing interdiction, strategic bombing, and close air support missions. The *combination of forces* employed in Afghanistan during the initial U.S. offensive, conducting missions that when *viewed separately* were nearly all examples of conventional operations, emerged as an example of special operations. The 2001 U.S. offensive in Afghanistan constitutes a series of special operations not because of the types of U.S. forces involved in attacking the Taliban, but because of the unique and unforeseen military requirements that drove their employment.

The separation of special operations from the forces that conduct them is more than a semantic argument. The consequences of such a divorce are significant, considering the size and scope of U.S. Special Operations Command, the activities it purports to conduct, and the manner by which forces assigned to it are created, trained and employed. The Special Operations Forces aligned under the command engage in a variety of military activities, many of which do not meet this paper's proposed definition for special operations.

U.S. Special Operations Command, as a unified command with service-like responsibilities, is responsible for the activities and direction of nearly 58,000 military

[29] Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda*, (New York, NY: Buckley Publishing Group, 2005), 25.

personnel across four military services. According to doctrine promulgated by the command, Special Operations Forces engage in 12 "core activities," including direct action, special reconnaissance, information operations, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, counterinsurgency operations, and activities specified by the Secretary of Defense, or President of the United States.[30] With the exception of the final "core activity," whose exclusivity is a matter of the direct tasking from national leadership and not a reflection of the mission requirements received by Special Operations Forces, *every* "core activity" listed by U.S. Special Operations Command *is, or has been, a mission set the larger U.S. conventional force also executes.*

The focus of current Special Operations Forces may be misguided when viewed through the lens of this paper's proposed definition. The current focus on Special Operations Forces capabilities, generated in isolation from conventional force requirements, leads to redundancies. As an example, the military forces of the United States have engaged in counterinsurgency operations for nearly all of the twenty-first century's first decade. Since counterinsurgency operations were not the focus of the U.S. military's conventional forces at the turn of the century, their recently assumed prominence has revealed a host of military requirements. These requirements have forced a significant change in the capabilities of conventional forces, to emphasize the unique aspects of this style of warfare. To organize markedly smaller and ostensibly different Special Operations Forces to fulfill the same requirements that conventional

[30] Tim Nye, *USSOCOM Fact Book*, (Tampa, FL: U.S. Special Operations Command Public Affairs, 2010), 7. Title 10 of the U.S. Code directs U.S. Special Operations Command to "develop special operations strategy, doctrine, and tactics." A more accurate description of the Command's activities might be the development of strategy, doctrine and tactics for *Special Operations Forces*. The Command's choice of "core activities" demonstrates that these forces, and not the military requirements that created them, are the clear focus of effort.

forces fulfill suggests either an under-resourced conventional military arm that lacks the means to meet its requirements, or a lack of discrete requirements for Special Operations Forces—and thus duplicative and wasteful capability.

The role of military commanders in identifying opportunities for the conduct of special operations is underappreciated. Clausewitz identified the need for military commanders to exercise insight and intuition to overcome the subjective uncertainty inherent to the changing character of warfare.[31] Special operations cannot occur without the creative spirit of a military commander recognizing emerging military requirements, and determining that conventional forces lack the capability or capacity to fill them. Such realizations codify the risks attendant to any form of warfare, and imply that subjective judgments about the requirements of war are, in essence, attempts to mitigate risk, particularly at the tactical and operational levels of war.[32] While counterintuitive, it is unrealized opportunities for the conduct of special operations that emphasizes the importance of military commanders in shaping their execution. Emerging military requirements that remain unaddressed by military commanders may constitute a failure to apply insight or intuition towards the execution of special operations.

The final implication of this paper's proposed definition for special operations is to suggest a new model for organizing, training, and equipping Special Operations Forces. Modern Special Operations Forces can be viewed as an elite collection of forces *narrowly* focused on *specific* military missions, but *gradually becoming indistinguishable*

---

[31] Clausewitz, *On War*, 90.

[32] Echevarria, *Contemporary War*, 192-3.

from the conventional military forces they support.[33] A more effective concept might involve the creation of a *broadly focused military force, whose emphasis on adaptability renders them fungible military assets.* This concept of a fungible military force is best suited to meet the challenges of rapid change and uncertain requirements that should be anticipated by forces developed and organized to conduct special operations.

Building a fungible and adaptive military force to address special operations may better align the requirements for such missions with their inherent uncertainty, but it is also likely difficult to accomplish. A broadly focused collection of Special Operations Forces may risk diffusion of effort against competing assumptions of future requirements, and differing visions of an uncertain operating environment. Training and equipping a force to be "adaptive" and "fungible" lacks the precision that informs a narrowly focused requirement to be capable of direct action missions, as an example. Narrowly focused military activities lie near the center of service programmatic and budgetary processes. Overcoming the bureaucratic sinews that link military requirements, military capabilities, and military funding may be the single greatest obstacle to realizing a new concept of operations and organization for Special Operations Forces.

Those overawed by the uncertainty Shakespeare ascribes to war might "profess ourselves to be the slaves of chance, and flies of every wind that blows."[34] Political and military leaders lack the luxury of allowing uncertainty to dominate preparations for war and must therefore find methods to attempt to manage it. It is possible, with the

---

[33] Jessica Turnley, *Retaining a Precarious Value as Special Operations Go Mainstream*, (Hurlburt Field, FL: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2008), 8-9. Turnley generally accepts the conflation of special operations with the personnel who conduct them, but also provides a detailed examination of the bureaucratic and cultural forces gradually conforming Special Operations Forces to conventional military norms.

[34] William Shakespeare, "*The Winter's Tale*," IV, iv, 543.

orientation outlined in this paper, to view *special operations as a nation's hedge against Clausewitzian uncertainty.* To accept this view realizes that special operations exist as a consequence of the inherent uncertainty of Clausewitz's trinitarian war, that specific military needs drive their creation and execution, and that special operations should be defined simply as military activities that lack broad conventional force requirements.

Works Cited

Beyerchen, Alan. "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War." *International Security.* Winter 1992/93.

Coveney, Peter and Roger Highfield. *Frontiers of Complexity: The Search For Order in a Chaotic World.* New York, Fawcett Columbine, 1995.

Echevarria II, Antulio J. *Armed Forces & Society* 22, No. 1. Fall 1995.

Echevarria II, Antulio J. *Clausewitz and Contemporary War.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Grey, Colin. *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare.* Pheonix, AZ: Orion Books Ltd, 2005.

Howard, Michael. "The Influence of Clausewitz." in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976.

Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Publication 3-05: Doctrine for Joint Special Operations.* Washington D.C., Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2003.

Kyle, James H. *The Guts To Try: The Untold Story of the Iran Hostage Rescue Mission by the On-Scene Desert Commander.* New York, NY: Orion Books, 2002.

Malvesti, Michele L. "Time for Action: Redefining SOF Missions and Activities." *CNAS Working Paper.* Washington D.C.: Center for a New American Security Publishing, 2009.

McRaven, William H. *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice.* New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1996.

Murray, Williamson. "Innovation Past and Present." Murray and Millett, eds. *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Naylor, Sean. *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda.* New York, NY: Buckley Publishing Group, 2005.

Nye, Tim. *USSOCOM Fact Book.* Tampa, FL: U.S. Special Operations Command Public Affairs, 2010.

Olson, Eric T. "A Balanced Approach to Irregular Warfare." *The Journal of International Security Affairs.* Washington D.C., Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs

Publishing, 2009.

Paret, Peter. "Clausewitz." in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Schuurman, Bart. "Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars." *Parameters.* Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Spring, 2010.

Shakespeare, William. "Coriolanus." *The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Shakespeare, William. "The Winter's Tale." *The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Spulak, Robert. "A Theory of Special Operations: the Origin, Qualities and Use of SOF." *JSOU Report 07-7.* Hurlburt Field, FL: The JSOU Press, 2007.

Sumida, Jon Tetsuro. *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to 'On War.'* Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

Turnley, Jessica. *Retaining a Precarious Value as Special Operations Go Mainstream.* Hurlburt Field, FL: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2008.

van Creveld, Martin. *The Transformation of War.* New York: The Free Press, 1991.

von Clausewitz, Carl. *On War.* ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Bibliography

Aron, Raymond. *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, trans. by Christine Booker and Norman Stone. London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 1983.

Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001.* New York, NY: Penguin, 2004.

Corbett, Julian. *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy.* Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988.

Cozette, Murielle. "Realistic Realism? American Political Realism, Clausewitz and Raymond Aron on the Problem of Means and Ends in International Politics." *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 27, Number 3. New York, NY: Routledge, September 2004.

Gray, Colin S. "Irregular Warfare: One Nature, Many Characters." in *Strategic Studies Quarterly, Winter 2007.* Montgomery, AL: Air University Press, 2007.

Hanson, Victor Davis. *Ripples of Battle: How Wars of the Past Still Determine How We Fight, How We Live, and How We Think.* New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003.

Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.* Washington D.C., Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2009.

Jomini, Baron Antoine Henri. *Art of War*, trans. and ed. by G.H. Mendell and W.P. Craighill. New York: NY: Greenwood Press, 1971.

Kiras, James D. *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism.* New York, NY: Routledge, 2006.

Lawrence, Thomas Edward. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom.* Hertfordshire, United Kingdom: Wordsworth, 1997.

Leebaert, Derek. *To Dare and Conquer: Special Operations and the Destiny of Nations, from Achilles to Al Qaeda.* New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2006.

Liddell Hart, Captain B.H. *Paris, Or the Future of War*, London, United Kingdom: Garland, 1972.

Liddell Hart, Captain B.H. *The Ghost of Napoleon.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934.

Osinga, Frans P.B. *Science, Strategy and War: The strategic theory of John Boyd.* New York, NY: Routledge Publishing, 2007.

Paret, Peter. *Clausewitz and the State.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976.

Paret, Peter. "The Genesis of 'On War.'" in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976.

Schroen, Gary C. *First In: An Insider's Account of how the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan.* New York, NY: Presidio Press, 2005.

Shy, John. "Jomini." in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Shy, John and Thomas Collier, "Revolutionary War." in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Simon, Herbert. *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 3rd edition. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

Tse-tung, Mao. "On Protracted War." *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung.* Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967.